CONCEIVING EMOTIONS
Martha Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought*

Diana Fritz Cates

ABSTRACT

In *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum offers a theory of the emotions. She argues that emotions are best conceived as thoughts, and she argues that emotion-thoughts can make valuable contributions to the moral life. She develops extensive accounts of compassion and erotic love as thoughts that are of great moral import. This paper seeks to elucidate what it means, for Nussbaum, to say that emotions are forms of thought. It raises critical questions about her conception of the structure of emotion, and about her conception of compassion, in particular. Finally, the paper seeks to show how analyzing the structure, as well as the moral value, of the emotions ultimately requires entering the realm of religious ethics.

KEY WORDS: appetite, cognition, compassion, emotions, Nussbaum, religious ethics

THE EMOTIONS HAVE RECEIVED CONSIDERABLE philosophical attention over the past few decades. Several streams of academic reflection have converged to create a large and impressive pool of literature on the topic. One contributing stream has been the ethics of virtue, developed most notably in conjunction with the recovery and reconstruction of Aristotelian and Thomistic ethical traditions.¹ Within these traditions, (most) virtues of character are construed as good habits of action and emotion; this means that one cannot understand moral virtues in general, or a particular moral virtue, without understanding the emotions and the relationship between emotions and other aspects of human interiority. Another contributing stream of reflection has been philosophical and moral psychology, integrating approaches and insights from the philosophy of mind, ethics (especially the ethics of virtue), psychology, and sometimes religious ethics. Scholars who work at these disciplinary junctures develop analytical tools to help distinguish, label, relate, and re-constitute

¹ Consider the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, James Gustafson, Stanley Hauerwas, and their many students.
various mental events, including emotions. Another stream of inquiry contributing to the growing literature on the emotions has been feminist thought, including epistemological inquiries into the emotions as modes of embodied knowing, and ethical investigations into the role that certain emotions (including caring) play in the moral life. These and related currents of inquiry, including those that emanate from literary studies, several areas of psychology, and biological science (including neuroscience), make it impossible to lament the neglect of emotion studies within the academy.

I think that most scholars who have studied this literature agree on certain things about the emotions. Most agree that emotions have a cognitive dimension, that they involve thought, judgment, and evaluation. Most agree that emotions have objects, and that they tend to be about people, things, or circumstances that a person considers to have some bearing on his or her own happiness or well-being. Generally, the most reliable way to identify what someone is feeling (with reference to a grammar of emotion)—and the best way to distinguish one emotion from another, especially within the context of a well-developed emotional life—is to identify the thoughts that the person is entertaining as she feels what she feels. Most scholars agree that emotions have some relationship to thoughts, but they disagree about the exact nature of this relationship or how best to characterize it. Do thoughts cause emotions, which are themselves something other than thoughts? Do thoughts cause and partly constitute emotions? Do thoughts alone constitute emotions? What, in any case, is meant by “thoughts”?

Most scholars who study the emotions also agree that it is partly because the emotions have some relationship to thoughts—especially to beliefs and evaluative judgments—that they are appropriately subject to critical reflection and moral evaluation. Despite the popular notion that “emotions aren’t good or bad—they just are,” most people who study ethics and the emotions agree that some of the beliefs that are ingredient in some emotions are false, and that it is good to correct false beliefs. More controversially, many scholars agree that some of the evaluative judgments that compose some emotions do not reflect the way things really are, or they reflect questionable attitudes about what is really important in life. Most agree that it is good to reflect on one’s emotions, and to assess the relationship between one’s emotions and “reality.” They disagree, however, about how to approach such assessments, mainly

---

2 Consider the work of Owen Flanagan, Ernest Wallwork, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, Carol Gilligan, Lawrence Kohlberg, Martha Nussbaum, Ronald de Sousa, Robert Solomon, Michael Stocker, James Gustafson.

3 Consider the work of Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Susan Moller Okin, Virginia Held, Lawrence Blum, Owen Flanagan, Beverly Wildung Harrison, Margaret Farley.
because they disagree about the nature of reality, including moral reality. To take a simple example, many theorists hold that the emotion of anger is (partly) composed of certain beliefs. Is anger composed of true beliefs regarding one’s dignity as a human being, and the importance of defending human dignity whenever it is threatened? Or is anger composed of false beliefs, including the belief that thoughtless or cruel people have the power to diminish one’s dignity, and that returning pain for pain can restore lost dignity?

Finally (a related point), most scholars who reflect philosophically and ethically on the emotions agree that emotions can be educated, although they disagree about how emotions can and ought to be educated, and about the extent of their educability. And most agree that well-educated emotions—construed, for example, as truthful, rational, or virtuous emotions—can make important contributions to the moral life. Most agree, minimally, that a person who is emotionally dead, immature, confused, unbalanced, repressed, or unreflective is likely to be unsuccessful as a moral agent, for many reasons. Scholars disagree about how to characterize an emotionally well-educated person (just as they disagree about how to characterize a person of complete virtue). To a large extent, this is because they disagree about what is worth caring about or getting worked up about, and to what degree. Those who study the emotions disagree about which, if any, emotions register the truth about life, primarily because they disagree about the truth of life.

Martha Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) is a wide-ranging engagement with these and other controversies concerning the nature and moral value of the emotions. The best parts of the book, in my view, are those that resist the temptation to rehash debates that are largely settled, at least in philosophical circles. The best parts are those that delve into the finer points of the substantial disagreements that remain. One of the most interesting of these has to do with the nature of the emotions. What sorts of things are the emotions, and what is the relationship between emotions and other aspects of experience, such as feelings, desires, and appetites? It is important to realize that there is no widely-accepted taxonomy of the inner life. The philosophical task is not so much to take a particular item of experience, an agreed-upon object, and examine it, as it were, under a microscope—as if we could take “emotions,” place them on a slide, take turns looking at the same things, and then debate how these things are like and unlike other things that we have observed. The task is more to propose a definition of “emotions” that helps those who ponder it to make better sense of some features of their own and other people’s experience and behavior. The task is to offer a conception that may differ from those that readers bring to the inquiry, but a conception that has greater power than other conceptions to promote self-understanding and the understanding of other human
beings, to enhance interpersonal communication, and in other ways to improve the quality of personal and communal life.

The structure of emotion

How best to conceive the emotions? In the first of three main parts to *Upheavals of Thought*, Nussbaum draws on ancient Stoic accounts of the structure of emotion (analyzed more extensively in Nussbaum 1994) to develop the view that emotions are best construed as thoughts or cognitions. The argument is not that emotions *include* a cognitive component, as well as other components. The argument is that emotions just are cognitions, and nothing more; cognitions, properly understood, are necessary and sufficient for emotion (Nussbaum 2001, 56–7). Anticipating objections, Nussbaum asks whether emotions necessarily include anything other than cognitions, taking the relevant question to be whether emotions necessarily include any “nonthinking movements” or “objectless feelings of pain and/or pleasure” (35), such as “a fluttering in [the] hands” or “a trembling in [the] stomach” (44), a “mere . . . heart-leaping” (27), a rise in blood pressure or pulse rate (57–8), or a movement of the limbs (45). In her view, some emotions may include one or another of these “nonthinking movements,” but they need not and often do not. Where such movements do occur, there are no consistent correlations between particular movements and particular emotions; emotions like grief and anger always include certain thoughts (on some level of awareness), but they feel different to different people (60–1). Nussbaum maintains that a “given feeling or bodily process” is not a necessary part of any emotion’s “internal conditions of identity” (57).

To make the case that emotions are best conceived as cognitions, and cognitions alone, Nussbaum must pack a large amount of psychological stuff into the category of cognition. She argues that the thoughts or cognitions that compose emotions are “intentional perceptions and . . . beliefs” (30). Emotion-cognitions are ways of seeing an object as invested with value or importance (27, 30). They are also ways of “[a]ssenting to or embracing a way of seeing” (38). They are commitments to “a view of the way things really are” (38). Emotion-cognitions are “ways of registering [or fully acknowledging] how things are with respect to the external (i.e., uncontrolled) items that we view as salient for our well-being” (4). They are “forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person’s own control great importance for the person’s own flourishing. Emotions are thus, in effect, acknowledgments of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency” (22).

---

4 Nussbaum appears to use “thought” and “cognition” synonymously; by “cognitive,” she means “nothing more than concerned with receiving and processing information” (23).
Cognition, on this account, ought not to be caricatured as cool, detached, and static. The kind of cognition that composes emotion is “dynamic.” “Reason here moves, embraces, refuses; it can move rapidly or slowly, it can move directly or with hesitation” (45). Emotion-composing cognition “entertains appearances”; it rushes toward them, opening up to take them in; it assents to them, saying, “yes, this is how things are” (45–6). Emotion-cognitions can have “urgency and heat” (27). Some of them are like geological upheavals, “[projecting] outward like a mountain range” (1). The cognitions that Nussbaum has in mind are not mere preparation for the upheaval of emotion; they are the upheaval itself (45). Nussbaum’s act of assenting to the proposition that, “My mother, an enormously valuable person and an important part of my life, is dead,” was such an upheaval (76). It was “itself a tearing of my self-sufficient condition. Knowing can be violent, given the truths that are there to be known” (45).

Even as Nussbaum packs this and more into the thoughts that compose emotions, she wants to lower the bar for what can count as an emotion-cognition in order to allow that infants and some animals have emotions. She argues that emotions are cognitive-evaluative in that they “always involve thought of an object combined with thought of the object’s salience or importance,” but she does not want to imply “the presence of elaborate calculation, of computation, or even of reflexive self-awareness” (23). In separate chapters on animal emotion, the emotions of infants, and the emotions that are evoked by certain kinds of music, Nussbaum plies her conception of emotion-cognition in intriguing ways, making use of a remarkable array of scholarship from multiple disciplines.

With respect to dogs and primates, in particular, the author appeals to various experiments and to a narrative about two real-life dogs and their owners to make the case that some animals have emotions, although she must eventually admit that they probably have quite diminished forms of most emotions (144–51). Some animals, she argues, make evaluative judgments and appraisals of the world. They engage in “ways of seeing” that involve “some sort of combination or predication—usually of some thing or person with an idea of salience, urgency, or importance. Moreover, these predications of salience are in turn combined with an assessment of how [a] goal is faring in the world” (126). As mentioned, Nussbaum argues that these appraisals need not involve “reflexive self-awareness” to count as emotions. They need involve only “something that we may call conscious awareness” (126). It may be difficult to imagine an entity making a judgment, say, that “this object is very important to me, and I am at serious risk of losing it,” without the presence of self-awareness, but this is Nussbaum’s view. She intends to include in the category of evaluative judgment a wide range of things, from highly
discriminating eudaimonistic (moral) judgments to “[vague]... ways of intending an object and marking it as salient” (129).

Nussbaum holds that these “more or less precise” emotion-composing judgments need not be linguistically formulable.

There are many kinds of cognitive activity or seeing-as in which ideas of salience and importance figure; there are pictorial imaginings, musical imaginings, the kinetic forms of imagining involved in the dance, and others. These are not all reducible to or straightforwardly translatable into linguistic symbolism, nor should we suppose that linguistic representing has pride of place as either the most sophisticated or the most basic mode (127–8).

Considering musical imaginings, Nussbaum argues that, if we are properly educated musically, some pieces of music elicit within us certain value-laden “ideas” about life, such as “the idea of our urgent need for and attachment to things outside ourselves that we do not control” (272). Musical emotion-thoughts tend to be more compressed, “dreamlike,” and general than other emotion-thoughts (266–7, 276). Yet they, too, have intentional objects. They are commonly about some feature of the human condition and some aspect of our own lives, in particular. They are also about the piece of music in question, which contains formal structures that are designed to “gesture” toward “certain general human facts and possibilities” (271–275). Thus, while Nussbaum begins with a Stoic account of emotion as thought or cognition of a highly articulate and even moral nature, she loosens and extends the notion of emotion-cognition to include the ways that some animals and human infants register dimensions of their reality as impinging on their “well-being,” and the way that educated listeners “[grasp] the expressive content of music” (239).

**Emotion, thought, and appetite**

There are many features of Nussbaum’s analysis of the structure of emotion that invite further reflection and debate. Most inviting, I think, is the thesis that emotions are nothing more than thoughts, combined with the author’s effort to define “thoughts” in such a way that they appear inclusive, flexible, dynamic, eruptive, and urgent enough to capture what one would naturally associate with the “e-motional” aspect of emotion—the experience of being moved by something, captivated by it, attracted to it, repulsed by it, or pulled in different directions.

The analysis of the structure of emotion requires considerable reflection on the relationship between thought and what is widely recognized in the Western philosophical tradition as something distinct from thought, but equally basic to human functioning, which is desire or, more broadly, appetite. Aristotle, for example, distinguishes between the cognitive and the appetitive powers of the soul, and argues that
passions or emotions, along with desires and rational wishes, are all forms of appetite (Aristotle 1941a, 432a15–433b30). Appetites are construed broadly as movements of the soul toward objects that are apprehended as (wholly, or in certain respects) pleasant or good, or away from objects that are apprehended as (wholly, or in certain respects) unpleasant or bad. Experiences of appetite, and the frustration of appetite, are intrinsically related to “feelings” of pleasure and pain.

Movements of the appetite always involve cognition, for “appetite is in every form of it relative to an end,” but appetite is best understood as formally distinct from cognition. Appetite is the source of movement in human beings.

. . . neither can the calculative faculty or what is called “mind” be the cause of such movement; for mind as speculative never thinks what is practicable, it never says anything about an object to be avoided or pursued, while this movement is always in something which is avoiding or pursuing an object. No, not even when it is aware of such an object does it at once enjoin pursuit or avoidance of it; e.g. the mind often thinks of something terrifying or pleasant without enjoining the emotion of fear. It is the heart that is moved. . . . Further, even when the mind does command and thought bids us pursue or avoid something, sometimes no movement is produced; we act in accordance with desire, as in the case of moral weakness. And, generally, we observe that the possessor of medical knowledge is not necessarily healing, which shows that something else is required to produce action in accordance with knowledge; the knowledge alone is not the cause. Lastly, appetite too is incompetent to account fully for movement; for those who successfully resist temptation have appetite and desire and yet follow mind and refuse to enact that for which they have appetite (Aristotle 1941a, 432b26).

Aristotle finds all sorts of reasons for distinguishing between thoughts, on the one hand, and appetites, on the other, even as he acknowledges that appetites are object-oriented and thus have an intrinsic relation to thought.

My understanding is that Nussbaum does not find the distinction between thought and appetite to be helpful for making sense of the emotions. She discusses briefly the relationship between emotion-thoughts and desires, but construes desires narrowly as “action-guiding” or “productive of a concrete plan of action,” which allows her to conclude easily that emotions do not necessarily include desires (136). She also

5 Nussbaum acknowledges that there is at least one case in which “desire” is a necessary constituent of emotion: sexual desire is a necessary component of the emotion of erotic love. She allows that, in this case, “desire . . . need not take the form of an actual plan or project” (476). Yet Nussbaum does not think that the importance of “desire” to erotic love requires a change in her general conception of emotion as thought. In her view, “sexual desire itself is a matter of thought and fantasy more than of any particular bodily manifestation” (ibid.).
discusses briefly the relationship between emotions and appetites, but construes the latter as “non-thinking,” bodily appetites, focusing almost exclusively on hunger. This causes her to draw a rather sharp distinction between emotions (as “object-flexible, value-suffused pulls”) and appetites (as “object-fixated, value-indifferent pushes”) (129–32). Nussbaum discusses more extensively the relationship between emotions and “feelings.” Again, she focuses on “feelings” that have no cognitive content, such as a feeling of “fatigue” or of “extra energy” (60). It is not surprising that she finds no necessary connection between objectless feelings of this sort and particular emotions. She admits that there are “feelings with a rich intentional content—feelings of the emptiness of one’s life without a certain person, feelings of unhappy love for that person, and so forth. Feelings like these,” she grants, “may enter into the identity conditions for some emotion.” In her view, however, “the word ‘feeling’ now does not contrast with our cognitive words ‘perception’ and ‘judgment,’ it is merely a terminological variant of them” (60). She would likely say the same thing about desires and other forms of appetite that have “rich intentional content”—such as the desire to spend time in someone’s company (which is arguably ingredient in the emotion of love), or the appetite for revenge (which is arguably ingredient in the emotion of anger). Object-oriented attachments, longing, need, and even erotic love are all construed by Nussbaum as thoughts.6

As we have read, one of the reasons why Aristotle distinguishes between thoughts and appetites (even though they rarely function apart from each other) is because he must account for the fact that there is sometimes a psychological gap, and there appears to be a logical distinction, between judging that “this is good for me,” and being drawn toward it—or between judging that “this is bad for me,” and being repelled by it. Sometimes a person is attracted to someone or something that she knows is not good for her. The person reasons with herself at length about the object in question, pointing out all of its negative qualities, trying to reform her desires. Yet some of these desires are, to some degree, resistant to change. Commenting on a passage in Aristotle’s Politics, Thomas Aquinas points out that desires and other forms of appetite (which, in his view, are the central ingredients of emotion) have a complex relationship to thought. They are amenable to thought; if they were not, it would not

---

6 In Part III of Upheavals, which concerns erotic love, Nussbaum agrees with Adam Smith (as she interprets him) that “love is an intense response to perceptions of the particularity, and the particularly high value, of another person’s body and mind” (465). Her analysis, in this part of the book, includes innumerable references to desire, wish, and longing, but I take it that these are construed as much as possible in a manner that is consistent with Part I, as reducible to forms of thought: “love itself is in the upheaval of mind” (476).
be possible to cultivate virtues like courage or temperance. Yet desires and appetites also have “something of their own” (due to the influence of imagination and sense perception) by virtue of which they can resist the influence of thought (Aquinas 1981, I: 81.3 ad 2).

Nussbaum acknowledges that there are cases where it seems like reason is in conflict with some other, resistant part of the self, but she argues that it is more helpful to think of such cases as conflicts within thought itself (85–88). Consider Aristotle’s example of the person who “thinks of something terrifying,” or thinks, let us say, that “this object poses an immediate danger to me,” but does not experience the upheaval of “fear” (Aristotle 1941a, 432b26). Nussbaum would likely argue that, in such a case, the person evidently does not really believe that she is in danger—she “may be able to say the words, but their significance has not sunk in” (324); or the person believes that she is in danger, but regards the danger as insignificant (perhaps because she does not believe that her well-being is very important); or the person believes that she is in danger, but also believes that some good can be attained in the situation, such that attending to this good keeps her from attending to the relevant evil. One could go on. For Nussbaum, what may feel to some of us like conflicts between thought and appetite (or, what may feel like a conflict between thought and the feeling of being moved in a direction that thought disapproves) are better construed as conflicts between thought and thought—conflicts between thoughts of various kinds, of varying degrees of generality and specificity, entertained on various levels of consciousness, with varying degrees of intensity. Emotional conflict is best conceived in terms of “a story of reason’s urgent struggles with itself concerning nothing less than how to imagine life” (86).

This is a challenging thesis. Many emotional conflicts do seem to involve conflicting judgments regarding how important something is to us. Reforming emotions that are responsible for such conflict does tend to require becoming aware of one’s evaluative judgments and changing one or more of them. When someone is unsuccessful at altering a malformed emotion (or habit of emotion), one can always argue that the person is evidently not willing to admit into consciousness, examine, and surrender a belief about how valuable some item is to her. Even the emotional conflict associated with addiction could be construed as a struggle between competing beliefs, which are commonly not fully acknowledged, including (something like) the belief that, if I keep using this substance, I will lose everything that is most important to me, and the belief that using this substance is the most important thing in my life. Why not take this tack? Why not hold that emotions are upheavals of thought, and emotional conflicts are best conceived as conflicts of thought?

Nussbaum’s intention is to provide people with a theory of the emotions that has “superior power to explain experience” (40). Readers must
decide whether her theory has more explanatory power than others. A good alternative, in my view, is the one initiated by Aristotle in his psychology (Aristotle 1941a), and developed in exquisite detail by Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas 1981). This is a cognitive-evaluative theory as well. According to it, emotions include the apprehension that a particular circumstance obtains, along with the assessment that certain features of this circumstance are attractive or good, repellant or evil, or some combination of both. Emotions are distinguished with reference to their objects. Yet emotions are nonetheless forms of appetite. They are movements of appetite that are more or less informed by (different kinds of) cognition, and more or less subject to the guidance of practical reason. I think that a Thomistic (or rather a neo-Thomistic) view has more explanatory power than Nussbaum’s, but this is not the place to explain or defend my choice. This is, rather, the place to challenge those who work out of the Thomistic tradition to determine exactly what Aquinas’s conception of the emotions as movements of appetite (relative to objects of cognition) explains that Nussbaum’s account of emotions as cognitions cannot explain just as well or better.

Compassion

Nussbaum develops, tests, and refines her view of emotions with respect to a few main examples. In the second major section of the book, she turns to compassion as an emotion. She begins with Aristotle’s account of pity or compassion in the Rhetoric (considering this account apart from his discussion of emotions as forms of appetite in De Anima). She argues that compassion, for Aristotle,

is a painful emotion directed at another person’s misfortune or suffering (Rhet. 1385b13 ff.). It has three cognitive elements. It seems to be Aristotle’s view that each of these is necessary for the emotion, and that they are jointly sufficient. Apparently he thinks that the pain itself is caused reliably by the beliefs: he calls it “pain at . . . the misfortune one believes to have befallen another” . . . The first cognitive requirement of compassion is a belief or appraisal that the suffering is serious rather than trivial. The second is the belief that the person does not deserve the suffering. The third is the belief that the possibilities of the person who experiences the emotion are similar to those of the sufferer (306).

Nussbaum offers an account of compassion that is very close to Aristotle’s. Her view differs primarily in that, for her, this third belief is a help in the formation of compassion, but it is not a necessity, and

---

7 I analyze Thomas’s theory of the passions (and provide detailed references) in Cates 1996 and 1997.
there is a different third belief that is, in her estimation, necessary. This belief is a “eudaimonistic judgment” that “this person, or creature, is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted” (321).

Again, anticipating objections, she asks whether there are any elements other than these judgments that are essential to compassion. She considers, in particular, whether one could have all of these judgments, “without having the upheaval of the painful emotion itself” (324). She admits that this can occur when the relevant evaluative beliefs are entertained, but their truth is not yet fully acknowledged—that is, when the beliefs have not yet “become part of [one’s] cognitive repertory, in such a way that [they] . . . affect the pattern of [one’s] other beliefs and . . . actions” (324). She argues, however, that when one fails to acknowledge fully the relevant compassion-composing beliefs, one fails to experience compassion. Nussbaum does not say much about how to distinguish a full acknowledgment (which is sufficient for compassion) from a less than full acknowledgment (which is insufficient for compassion). Her effort to make this important distinction is complicated by the thesis that it is possible to have “nonconscious compassion” (326). This would seem to imply a “full acknowledgment” that involves “upheaval,” but where one is unaware of either the beliefs or their upsetting quality.

Nussbaum indicates that a full acknowledgment of the requisite evaluative beliefs will commonly (though not necessarily) involve “mental pain.” She construes this mental pain, however, as nothing “over and above the thought that something very bad is happening, and that it matters for one’s scheme of goals and projects” (325). Hence, it is not necessary to characterize the experience of pain as an additional, necessary component of compassion. Nussbaum also says that we would expect a full acknowledgment of the relevant evaluative beliefs to arouse a motive to engage in helping behavior.

If one believes that the misfortunes of others are serious, and that they have not brought misfortune on themselves, and, in addition, that they are themselves important parts of one’s own scheme of ends and goals, then the conjunction of these beliefs is very likely to lead to action addressing the suffering. It may not do so, if there is no available course of action that suggests itself. But if there is, it will be difficult to believe that the compassionate person really does have all three judgments, if she does not do something to address the victim’s vulnerability (335).

Nussbaum does not elucidate the causal connection between the relevant evaluative beliefs and the helping behavior. It appears that, in her view, the three compassion-composing beliefs are, in themselves, sufficient to generate a “motive” to help and, where an “available course of action . . . suggests itself,” the helping behavior itself (335–6).
motive, in any case, is caused by compassion, but is not itself a component of compassion.8

I have developed a full account of compassion elsewhere (Cates 1997). My view differs in striking ways from Nussbaum’s—so much so that it is unclear whether we are talking about the same phenomenon. In this context, however, I want to focus on one feature of Nussbaum’s account that I find especially provocative. The author argues that compassion requires the judgment that the object of one’s “cognitive upheaval” suffers undeservedly—that “this person did not bring the suffering on himself or herself” (321). Nussbaum expects that her readers will readily agree on this point: “Insofar as we believe that a person has come to grief through his or her own fault, we blame and reproach, rather than having compassion” (311). She cites a host of classic and modern authors who regard this point as obvious.

There are many thinkers, however, who would regard this as anything but obvious. It is possible to make a moral judgment concerning someone’s action or character, to hold him fully responsible for a serious failure, and to feel compassion for him at the same time. It is also possible to feel compassion for someone while setting aside the question of guilt (unless that question is relevant for assessing the nature of someone’s suffering and the requirements for alleviating that suffering). For example, most Buddhists believe that all sentient beings are in a state of suffering, and that a principal cause of this suffering in any given human being is his or her own ignorance about the nature of reality, and his or her ignorant desires. The implication is that all humans who suffer are partly responsible for their own suffering, such that one could never say straightforwardly that “this person did not bring the suffering on himself or herself” (321). Yet most Buddhists conceive of the best sort of human life in light of the bodhisattva ideal, and most conceive of a bodhisattva as one who aspires to universal and unconditional compassion. The Dalai Lama, for example, thinks that what the Chinese have done to Tibet and the Tibetan people is morally reprehensible, yet he has compassion for the Chinese, including the members of the Chinese leadership, and he urges others to cultivate compassion, even as they work to defend human

8 On 342, Nussbaum speaks of “thought [attending] to certain human facts…with concern to make the lot of the suffering person as good, other things being equal, as it can be—because that person is an object of one’s concern.” I would argue that “concern” to alleviate suffering is internal to compassion here, and that this “concern” is something more than the three relevant beliefs. “Concern” is also something more than these three beliefs plus some additional beliefs, such as the belief that “it is good for me to help.” A compassionate person is (among other things) captivated by and drawn toward the person who is in pain, and she wants to alleviate (at least some dimension of) the other’s pain and/or suffering, commonly by removing one or more of its causes (which could be anything from ignorance, to a physical cause, to the fear of being alone in one’s pain).
rights in Tibet and around the world (Gyatso 1990). What is the relationship between Nussbaum’s conception of compassion and what the Dalai Lama refers to by the same name?

To take one other example, people in the Christian tradition hold Jesus up as a prophet and a moral exemplar, as well as a savior. Although Jesus is depicted differently by different authors, most Christians who are familiar with the Christian Bible perceive Jesus as someone who exercised unconditional compassion toward the people who crossed his path, even as he judged some people’s actions to be wrong and their hearts to be deformed, and urged them to change their ways. Most Christians think of Jesus’s “heavenly Father” too as one who exhibits unconditional love and compassion, and they are encouraged by pastors and priests to imitate God by practicing unconditional love and compassion in the world. Christians are generally taught to view the divine compassion as unmerited and extravagant, and they are encouraged to be similarly extravagant in their compassion—to a point that many people (including resistant Christians) regard as absurd and even offensive. In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), the father, representing God and the ideal follower of God, has compassion for one of his two sons, who has behaved badly and thereby brought great suffering on himself. The father has compassion before the son even has the chance to confess his wrongdoing to his father. It is not surprising that the other son objects, thinking that the father’s compassion is excessive and unfair, but the parable is arguably intended to raise moral aspirations above those of the withholding son. Again, what is the relationship between Nussbaum’s conception of compassion and the compassion that most Christians associate with God and Jesus?

Nussbaum is a defender of mercy (leniency in assigning punishment) in the criminal justice system. Her brief account of mercy in Upheavals (developed more extensively in Nussbaum 1993) encourages those who are responsible for judging and punishing people to complexify their thinking about moral agency and responsibility. Nussbaum urges all of us not to assume that a given person who has gone to the bad has only himself or herself to blame for becoming a bad person and for bearing bad fruit. She draws a connection between mercy and compassion.

Mercy does differ from compassion: for it presupposes that the offender has done a wrong, and deserves some punishment for that wrong. It does not say that the trouble the offender is in came to her through no fault of her own. Nonetheless, as our analysis has revealed, it has much in common with compassion as well—for it focuses on obstacles to flourishing that seem too great to overcome. It says yes, you did commit a deliberate wrong, but the fact that you got to that point was not altogether your fault. It focuses on the social, natural, and familial features of the offender’s life that offer a measure of extenuation for the fault, even though the commission of the
fault itself meets the law's strict standards of moral accountability. In order to do this, it takes up a narrative attitude toward the offender's history that is very similar to the sympathetic perception involved in compassion. It follows the offender's whole history in considerable detail, scrutinizing it for extenuating features (397).

Nussbaum seems eager to encourage compassion by encouraging people not to be too quick to assume that someone is substantially and inexcusably “at fault” for his or her own suffering and is thus undeserving of compassion (311–15). However, the issue is whether “not being at fault” ought to be included in the definition of compassion at all—whether assessing fault or degree of fault ought to be thought of as internal to the exercise of compassion. If making such assessments is regarded as integral to compassion, a necessary condition, then compassion will be very rare. The recognition that making a judgment of this kind is a serious matter, and that it must be made only after a careful consideration of all relevant details of a person's case, is likely to forestall compassion indefinitely.

**Concluding thoughts on religion**

The effort to define compassion is not a purely conceptual effort, separate from the normative work of assessing the moral value of compassion. The effort to define compassion is itself a normative enterprise. It is implicitly a way of indicating how people ought to receive and respond to those who are suffering.9 As one engages in this sort of fundamental moral reflection, one is drawn ineluctably into the arena of religious ethics (Reeder 1998). One must become more conscious and reflective about one's own and others' beliefs about what is ultimately real, true, and good. In the third and final part of her book, Nussbaum reflects philosophically on the work of many thinkers and artists, from Plato to Augustine to Dante to Emily Brontë to Gustav Mahler, and more. She engages in this reflection ostensibly in order to develop a compelling conception of the emotion of erotic love. She wants to show how love can “reform itself, so as not to be excessively needy, vengeful, or partial, and so as to be supportive of general social compassion, reciprocity, and respect for individuality” (481). In the process, Nussbaum must identify some of her most basic moral and religious convictions.

Emotions like erotic love are of moral import for Nussbaum because, at least some of the time, if they have been well-formed or duly re-formed,

---

9 This is one reason why I argue in Cates 1997 that compassion ought to be construed as a virtue, and not simply as an emotion. In any case, it is important to distinguish between virtuous and non-virtuous instances of the emotion in question.
they help people get “to the bottom of things” (254). They help people register important truths about life. And what are these truths? I cannot capture in a few pages the response that *Upheavals*, taken as a whole, offers to this question. However, I want to call attention to a contrast that Nussbaum draws between two ways of being human, which reflect different directional pulls within love itself. The contrast is between seeking to transcend the vulnerability, instability, and incompleteness of this world in some form of Platonic ascent, and choosing (to the contrary) to resist this temptation, staying grounded in the world of everyday life, focused intently and only on the possibilities of this world, attached to its fragile, mortal (and defecating) creatures, invested in their limited moral efforts, and willing to suffer the cost of this attachment/investment, which is the excruciating pain of loss.

Nussbaum is usually careful not to over-generalize (speaking, for example, of “Augustine’s Christian” [537], rather than assuming that Augustine speaks for all Christians about what it means to be Christian). However, she links the above contrast to a perceived contrast between Christianity (in general) and Judaism (in general). An implication of her view is that, generally, Judaism fares better than Christianity, philosophically, at getting erotic love (and related aspects of morality) right. In her view, Judaism holds more tightly and faithfully to the real-life individual in his or her “deep vulnerability to external influence,” and his or her profound need for other humans (530). Judaism is more successful at avoiding the problems of vengeance, shame, and disgust (624–31), upholding the dignity of moral agency (551), and recognizing the value of earthly striving (642–3). Nussbaum writes,

To put my cards on the table, then, what I shall say henceforth is said from the point of view of someone who has converted from Christianity to Judaism, and whose understanding [sic] of Judaism gives the moral sphere considerable autonomy and centrality, seeing the concern of God for man [sic] as essentially moral and political, focused on this-worldly concerns and actions, and intelligible from the point of view of a this-worldly use of intelligence (549).

Nussbaum is “alarmed” by the “insistent otherworldly direction of [Augustine’s] longing. Death is irrelevant, real suffering in this world is irrelevant, all that is relevant is coming into God’s presence” (552). Dante does better, she argues, at embracing “this world” with an earthly love and a commitment to earthly justice, but his “desire to represent the world as a place whose events matter greatly” stands in tension with his portrait of Paradise: “The image of Heaven as a place of self-sufficiency, and a place of beatitude in the sense of an end to mourning, cannot ultimately be reconciled,” in Nussbaum’s view, “with the idea of ongoing compassion for human life. Compassion is incomprehensible without
mourn; if these things are important, they are important” (589–90). With Emily Brontë, Nussbaum holds that, “This world... will always remain a Hell if we are allowed to aim at redemption from it, rather than at the amelioration of life within it, and led to anticipate the end of striving, rather than to respect the dignity of the striving itself” (607). Nussbaum affirms what she thinks Hannah Arendt “would have absorbed from her own Jewish tradition,” which is that, “both God and man [sic] are to care intensely about each earthly instance of injustice and wrongful death, directing compassion altogether toward the theater of history and not at all toward the shadowy and uncertain realm that may or may not lie outside it” (553).

It is interesting to take note of Nussbaum’s conception of Christianity and of Judaism, and to read parts of Upheavals as a partial answer to the question of why she has chosen to identify with Judaism. It is even more interesting to ponder the intimate connection between the author’s religious beliefs and her analysis of the emotions, including her analysis of particular emotions like grief, compassion, and love. Nussbaum maintains that emotions are thoughts that “mark our lives as uneven, uncertain, and prone to reversal” (1). She does not say, simply, that emotions give us the impression that our lives are uneven, uncertain, and prone to reversal; she says that our lives are really like this, and emotions help us to acknowledge it. However, people who live within different worlds of religious imagination might quarrel with Nussbaum even at this point: in what respects, for example, is life uncertain? Is it uncertain in the most important respects? What are the most important respects? When it comes to individual emotions, there will be even more question about whether a given emotion-thought registers only what a person takes to be the case about life, or whether it registers what is actually the case. One cannot recommend any emotions for the way they help humans to register important truths about life without offering a compelling view of the truth (in conversation with other, competing views). Nussbaum realizes this, up to a point (11). Her work convinces me, however, that developing a theory of the emotions requires delving extensively into questions about what is really (and not only apparently) real.

We can see that a different view of life’s ultimate meaning and value may result in the construction of a different theory of the emotions, and will likely result in different accounts of individual emotions, and different explicitly normative assessments of the emotions. We can also anticipate that living within significantly different worldviews will probably contribute to the formation of different emotional experiences within people. Nussbaum takes note of this in a chapter on the social construction of emotion (141). Humans around the world have a lot in common, due in part to our common animality, but different ways of construing meaning and value (as animals who are distinctively human) make identifying,
characterizing, and evaluating emotions cross-culturally a challenging task. This is, however, an important project for comparative ethics, especially for the comparative study of virtue. Given that emotions appear to embody deep, often hidden assumptions about how to interpret reality, and about how much certain features of reality matter, in the ultimate scheme of things, and given the importance of thinking carefully and critically about alternative conceptions of the way things are for humans, the comparative study of virtue—and of virtuous emotion—must involve the academic study of religion and religious ethics. Nussbaum’s initial moves in this direction are encouraging, even if they are controversial in content.10

REFERENCES

Aquinas, Thomas

Aristotle
1985 *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett.

Cates, Diana Fritz

Gyatso, Tenzin (the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet)

Nussbaum, Martha C.

Reeder, John P., Jr.

10 Thanks to J. Keith Green for helpful comments on an earlier draft, and to John P. Reeder, Jr., for ongoing conversation about the study of religious ethics.